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Education Revolution

THE MAGAZINE OF EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES



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Reflections on Choice, Empowerment, and Democracy



INSIDE:

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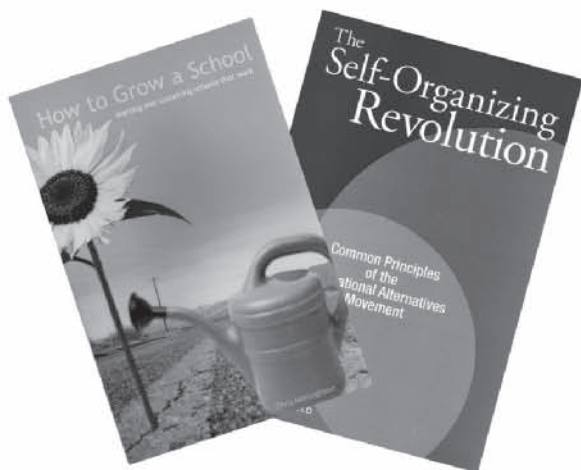
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The **Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)** was founded in 1989 by Jerry Mintz. AERO is a branch of the School of Living, a non-profit organization founded in 1934 by Ralph Borsodi. **AERO's** goal is to advance student-driven, learner-centered approaches to education. **AERO** is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world. Education Alternatives include, but are not limited to, Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Choice, Democratic, Home-school, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. One of **AERO's** areas of expertise is democratic process and democratic education, but equally important is the networking of all forms of educational alternatives. It is through our work and mission that we hope to create an education revolution.

AERO's mission is to help create an education revolution to make student-centered alternatives available to everyone.

Towards this end, **AERO** provides information, resources and guidance to families, schools and organizations regarding their educational choices. **AERO** disseminates information internationally on topics such as: homeschooling, public and private alternative schools, and charter schools. **AERO's** long-term goal is to become a more effective catalyst for educational change by providing books, magazines, conferences, online courses, consultations, support groups, and organizational information and seminars in the field of alternative education.

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Being There

BY JERRY MINTZ

Francine Sherwood has been a part of the AERO network for many years. She homeschooled her daughter and has attended several AERO conferences. She has participated in the AERO school starter programs and established a small learning center in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Until Christmas vacation she had seven students in her program, several of which were paid for by Florida's McKay scholarship, which provides funding for children who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. The scholarship can be used as tuition at private schools and programs.

Apparently some shady schools had been started in Florida simply to take advantage of this funding. One large one recently lost its approval for funding, and the parents scrambled to find places in which to place their children. These were mostly low income, urban minorities. Thus Francine's Lifetime Learning was about to go from seven students to over forty overnight! At that time she contacted AERO with a single word, "HELP!" We agreed to give her what support we could.

A couple of weeks later she asked me to visit her school in Florida and help the students and staff members (at least 6 staff came from the old school) make the transition to a learner centered and possibly democratic approach.

The situation was daunting to Francine, Matt, and Darrell (the original staff members), and the new staff. These new teachers included Benny Blades, a former outstanding NFL football player who helped these children escape their former school situation and followed them to Francine's program. Among other things there was no tuition funding to begin with, there was no lunch program, and no money or vehicles for transporting students (aged 8 to 18) to and from their homes in Ft. Lauderdale to the school's location in the northern suburbs. To deal with the transportation situation they bought a 1983 16-passenger van for \$2000, and the staff members pitched in with their own vehicles. This takes about 2 hours for many of them, before and after school! Matt, who usually does the early run, starts picking kids up at 6 AM.

Furthermore, many of the new students felt they had been "dumped" in the new location, which is very plain and basic in comparison to the school that had its funding removed. It turns out, the old school usually just handed a packet of material to the students each day (maybe about an hour's worth of work), after which they had little more to do, so they just left school. Academically, many of them were barely able to do elementary math or write a logical sentence, even though some said they were "seniors."

The morning I arrived, I took a quick tour, and saw that there were generally several groups. One new teacher,

a very conscientious woman from Colombia, works with the elementary children, as well as one high schooler who is autistic and another who is developmentally disabled. Darrell works with the junior high aged kids, and Matt with some of the older students who are college bound. When I first arrived, many of the other students, about 20, seemed to mostly sit around, talk, listen to music in their earphones, and play video games on their Ipods.

As I looked at the situation I felt I should not wait. I decided to first try to work with that most difficult group. I thought I would introduce them to "organic curriculum." I sometimes call this a "question class." The students are encouraged to brainstorm any questions that come to their minds. Nothing should be censored. Nothing is considered too silly or irrelevant. I gave as an example, a question that one child once posed: "Do fish fart?"

At first there was little response. They didn't seem to know what to make of it. Then the first question came:

"Is she pretty?" referring to a girl sitting next to the boy who posed it.

Next was, "Do they like each other?" about whether a particular boy and girl who were teasing each other.

The third was, "Where did fabric come from?"

Then "How many years of college do you need to get a PhD?"

"Why does girls' hair get long?"

"Why don't girls grow facial hair?"

"Where did money come from?"

"What are the qualifications for a marine biology degree? (Same boy as PhD. question)

"How are mirrors made?"

"Why do we stretch? (after one student stretched)

I then asked the students in the group to vote on any of the questions that interested them. The most popular was "Do they like each other." This segued into the question about "Is she pretty?" and a discussion about what beauty is. Many thought it had more to do with personality. We talked about



Students at Lifetime Learning

beauty in different cultures. We also talked about why people might tease each other when they liked the other person. We talked about three or four other questions. For example, the stretching question got into the circulatory system and how it evolved, how veins need the movement of muscles to push blood back to the heart, etc. The whole process with that group took about a half hour. I then went on to three other groups in the next hour or two, generating questions and discussions in much the same way. Each group was very different from the others.

The second group was the oldest, including some who wanted to go on to college, and some who were supposed to be seniors, although academically many lacked a lot of skills. They asked questions like “What is the strongest part of your body? Why is sand sometimes white and sometimes black? Why does water flush in opposite directions in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere? Who started curse words? How are credit cards made?”

One particular student obviously thought he would trip me up by asking, “What is the strongest weed?” He followed up with “Why is marijuana illegal?” I think he was surprised that I took his questions seriously and considered the questions important. For example why is the sale of alcohol and tobacco legal?

The junior high age group was particularly interested in me, asking, “Who are you? Where are you from? What school did you go to? How long have you been doing this?”

The most popular question was, “Is it true we can fire teachers?”

The elementary aged students asked a lot of science-oriented questions, tinged with fantasy: “Is there a dragon triangle (like the Bermuda Triangle)? Is there a Bermuda Triangle? Are there monsters in the sea? Are mermaids real? Do houses move? Why do they only have one queen ant to make babies? Do they have princes and queens all over the world? Do time machines exist? Who do strange animals exist under the sea? Do wands exist like in Harry Potter? Do squid have 8 legs like an octopus?”

In this process I met every student in the school within a short time. Many of them came up to me with follow up questions after these sessions.

After touching base with Francine and Matt we decided to try an all school democratic meeting in the afternoon. We gathered together all of the students and made as good a circle as we could in the largest room. I explained to the students and staff members the concept of the democratic meeting. I said that this was only a demonstration of the process, although it quickly tends to become real.

I told them they could put anything they wanted on the agenda. It could be a good idea for the school, a problem at the school, or a conflict between people, for example. We made an agenda and an eight-year-old girl volunteered to take meeting notes.

The first item put on the agenda was “New building.” That involved a discussion about whether and when the

school would be able to move to a new building. In that discussion Francine noted that they wanted to move into the building of the school they came from, but it could not be arranged, and they probably would not be able to move until next year.

Next on the agenda was "New computers." Also discussed was "fights," about how meetings might resolve fights. I told them about the "stop rule," which was used in my school and had spread to many other schools. With the stop rule a student or teacher can say "stop" if something is getting them very upset. It could be physical or it could be verbal, for example. If the person did not stop they would have broken the stop rule and the consequence would be determined by the meeting. It is mostly a communication tool, as sometimes altercations are caused simply because one person does not realize the other is very upset.

Also discussed at the first meeting were transportation problems, the need for more physical education, and school lunch. Overall the meeting was fairly orderly and quiet, without a great deal of participation, but was pretty good for a first meeting.

I have found that teaching table tennis is a way to help students get confidence as learners in a completely non-academically threatening way and had hoped to get a ping-pong table for the school. So, first thing in the morning on my second day, I put three conference tables together to approximate the size of a ping-pong table (9 feet by five feet) and stuck a

two by four board in the middle to make a net. I brought in my paddles and a ball. Within seconds the alienated group poured in and I started teaching them. Initially, not many knew how to play at all and they all learned very fast. The two or three who did know somewhat how to play immediately challenged me. After a game or two they were more than willing to listen to instruction! Eventually more than half of the school learned to play, and by the next day they had organized a tournament themselves. Wow!

We had a follow up meeting the next morning and discussed whether they liked the idea of the meeting or preferred that teachers make all the decisions. They overwhelmingly voted that they wanted to make decisions by the meeting process. It was passed that there would be a regularly scheduled weekly meeting, but that special meetings could be called as needed.

I met with the teachers during lunchtime. One questioned whether the culture of the inner city kids would be amenable to democratic process. Another worried about what would happen as the kids brought home these ideas. But most seemed open to the idea of trying it.

On my third and last day we had our scheduled meeting. I wasn't expecting it to be long or detailed, but there turned out to be much more participation and involvement. Two students co-chaired the meeting, with my help. Also, instead of abstaining or not participating, most of the students were now voting. Overall I am amazed at how everyone pulled

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together to create a viable school. I was impressed at the openness of the students to these new ideas despite how foreign they were to their previous experiences.

It is now May and the school is still doing well, still having democratic meetings. I recently talked with staff and students at the school who are interesting in going to the AERO conference, and we discussed ways to raise funds to make this possible. I hope to keep in touch with everyone and help in any way that I can.

* * * *

I also attended the Education Writers Conference in Washington, D.C. I decided to come down here on the chance that I could somehow communicate to Arne Duncan, President Obama's new Secretary of Education, something about the need to get rid of No Child Left Behind. He talked for about 25 minutes to the large audience of education writers from all over the country. Duncan seems to be an affable man, confident in himself but not too arrogant. For a while he talked about when he felt he had accomplished in Chicago, but a lot of it sounded to me like it was supporting No Child Left Behind.

I stood in the line at the audience microphone but almost got stopped. The secretary of the organization came over to tell me that the line was just for reporters. Obviously she knew who I was and thought I might be a loose cannon. I told her that I WAS a reporter, for Education Revolution Magazine! She backed off, reluctantly.

Finally it was my turn. I said, "I'm Jerry Mintz from *Education Revolution* Magazine. Our audience is public and private alternative schools. We have a database of over 12,000 of them. In your talk you said that President Obama supports innovative charter schools. But those schools and others in our network find that No Child Left Behind makes innovation and change very difficult. We don't feel that it measures the things we feel are most important. We want it scrapped. Will your administration do that?"

He replied that there were some things he didn't like in the law and some things he liked, that he would have to look at it in detail.

I repeated, "We want it scrapped. Will it be scrapped?"

He replied, "I don't know. But the name No Child Left Behind is toxic. We will at least change the name!"

Afterward I said to John Merrow who does the Merrow documentaries on PBS. "So he will keep it but change its name?" He nodded knowingly.

I gave our latest *Education Revolution* Magazine and a copy of my book to Duncan's nearby p.r. man who was pointed out by Merrow, and he gave me an email address through which I could contact him to follow up. I then came up and shook Duncan's hand, reiterating our position. He acknowledged it. Surprisingly, I had accomplished what I set out to do. I hope it helped a little. ●

FROM THE

Editor's Desk

BY RON MILLER

This issue is *packed* with provocative writings. Hopefully they will keep you reading and pondering through the summer. Let us know what you think. And send us *your* writing for future issues, especially if you are interested in topics or learning approaches that have not yet been covered.

It seems to me that the authors in this issue are raising core philosophical questions that reflect the profound cultural and historical significance of educational alternatives. These questions transcend specific teaching models or identification with any one group. Whether you think of yourself as a "democratic" educator or a Montessorian, an unschooler or an advocate of progressive public education (or something else), your perspective on issues of choice, empowerment and democracy distinguishes you from the beliefs and policies of the technocrats and standardistos who define mainstream education, and connects you with a broad social movement for educational liberation.

Back in the 1980s, many of us talked a lot about a coming "paradigm shift" in education and society. This concept, introduced in Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, helped us distinguish between surface-layer changes in public policy or educational practice and the more deeply engrained system of beliefs, assumptions, and core values that shape social institutions. We argued that the industrial age paradigm was beginning to lose its authority and would soon be replaced by a more holistic paradigm, and that this shift would make it possible for us to build an entirely new network of learning communities on the ruins of the old system.

It turns out that our expectations were rather too simplistic and optimistic, and the term "paradigm" is not much used anymore, at least not so casually. Yet I still believe that we are living at a transitional time in human history, when an established worldview is under enormous stress and a new one, not yet fully defined, is emerging. Those of us who dare to ask insolent questions about children and learning, who redefine what "education" means and where it can take place, are giving shape and expression to this new worldview. We don't just oppose the current policy of ruthless, relentless testing, we explicitly reject the deeply rooted assumptions about learning, schooling, and technocratic management that make such blatant anti-democratic policies thinkable at all. We are, in fact, busting old paradigms.

Keep asking these questions. ●

Putting the Revolution into Education

Observations on Learning and Democracy from a Nation-wide Tour

BY ALTHEA BAIRD

In the fall of 2005, Amber and I were crossing paths for a few hours, meeting up in a friend's kitchen, when we hatched our plan to make an audio documentary about democratic (or what we call "radical") alternative education. I was one year out of high school and still unlearning, with great passion, the rules of compulsory public school. Amber was a year out of college doing her own de-schooling and working in an after-school program. We read books, compiled lists and by the spring of 2006, we were on the road.

In three months, we visited 25 private schools, public schools, community centers and after school programs. We drove through the nights, visited schools by day, and made gas money performing a multimedia dance piece at local venues in the evenings. Then at the crack of dawn we would rise again, armed with gas station coffee, microphone and headphones. We sat in on morning meetings, went to classes, visited students' internships, studios and playgrounds. We even started a band with a group of free schoolers in Pennsylvania. Our goal in these recordings and interviews was to document the *practice* of radical learning. We sought out examples that illustrated the principles of democratic education that we had identified.

These principles were and are:

[1] Young people can learn the life skills they need by pursuing their own passions in a non-authoritarian, "democratic" environment.

[2] Equal participation in this type of liberatory learning is a right of all people, not just some.

[3] Learning takes place outside, as well as inside, the four walls of the school building.

In these ways, democratic education is intrinsically a matter of social justice. In these ways, we believed that all the learning spaces on our itinerary would share the common purpose of creating a viable alternative to compulsory school—an education revolution.

Now we wanted to find the real-life examples that would spell out the formula for creating such an environment.

In our journey from strip-mall Wisconsin's "second-

chance" public school, to an urban internship-based charter school, to "Sudbury" schools in five states, to an interview with Not Back to School Camp founder, Grace Llewellyn, we found both inspiration and overarching complexity. Our conversations at schools were full of hope, conviction, and contradiction. We visited some incredible working examples of democratic education, but while many learning spaces had the non-authoritarian, student-directed aspects firmly in place, the democratic notions of liberatory education *for all people* and in *all aspects of community* were often lacking. The gap between the education and the revolution was wide.

We also found that many learning spaces *wanted* to have the conversation about how their experiment with student-based learning could relate to a broader movement of education justice, of democratic education for all. The values were in place, but it seemed that many communities just didn't know where to start.

On this note, I would like to describe three strategies for aligning these values with actions, for building a movement of non-hierarchical community-based learning for all people, not just those already involved in the democratic learning movement. These are:

[1] Redefining "accessibility"

[2] Community Education

[3] Supporting Education Justice

1. ACCESSIBILITY

"Access isn't the door to the house, it's the way the house was built and who built it."

Sitting on beautiful hardwood floors, or on carpets surrounded with wooden blocks or crayons, we often heard a similar starry-eyed sentiment at democratic schools:

"As long as you can agree to the ideology, ANYONE can come here." (Really, anyone? Then why are nearly all of your students white?)

From coast to coast we visited free schools (that is, generally private, tuition-based, k-12 schools) where teachers and parents voiced the paradoxical assertions that: 1) they wanted their school to be "accessible" and 2) that their school was undeniably homogenous.

At many spaces we visited, the working definition of “accessible” was limited to scholarships, work-trade, or sliding scale tuition options. (Socioeconomic diversity is often confused with racial diversity in these cases.) It was defined by numbers of students of color and poor students in the school. In this case, the word “access” could be replaced with “tokenism” (a policy or practice of limited inclusion of members of an oppressed group (i.e. women, people of color, queer people etc.) usually creating a false appearance of inclusive practices, intentional or not).

Alternatively, let us look at “accessibility” being defined as structures having the authentic capacity to serve diverse populations. It could look like physically approachable infrastructure for young people with varying physical disabilities. Or teachers with the skills to work with these students. It could

**This is a community of practice.
Students are not only learning in a
liberated way, they are practicing the
tools of liberation that are necessary to
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communities of practice can and must
grow from any learning space.**

mean the presence and leadership of founders, board members, administrators, and teachers of color. It could mean partnerships with community groups doing social justice work, or a library well-stocked with books about varying identities and experiences. The goal of this redefinition is a school-wide culture of diversity grounded in difference and alliance, anti-oppression, and commitment to change.

In other words, we saw many free schools throwing open the doors to their buildings, and we saw that some people were walking in. But this alone did not speak to whether the actual learning environment was equally beneficial and meaningful to young people from various communities and with various needs.

Often learning spaces grappling with this paradox of their social justice values and the homogeneity of their schools are those formed through an ideological community. This means a group of individuals with the same visions and strategies for changing education who may not necessarily live near each other or share a physical community. Rather, they commute so that their children can be together with other like minded people. The emphasis on surface or token “accessibility” obscures the real desire of these democratic learning spaces to participate in a wider de-schooling movement, to create an “education revolution” for all.

2. COMMUNITY EDUCATION

In contrast to learning spaces based on ideological community, let us consider “community education,” in which learning is based on and integrated with local physical community. Students live in the neighborhood, community members play the roles of teachers, board members, and mentors, and local parks, businesses, buildings and organizations become classrooms. There are numerous examples of community education, not always in the form of “free schools,” but often with similar values and goals.

The Making Changes Freedom School is an after-school program located in Contra Costa County, CA. It is a small program run by educators who live in the neighborhood and it is populated by students from the neighborhood. The students all attend local public schools during the day and are faced with similar struggles with education: Lack of funding, over-emphasis on standards, lack of relevant curriculum, etc.

The MCFS grew out of the powerful 70 mile march and Fast4Education campaigns, where local families and educators came together to protest the lack of equity and transparency in the state’s educational budget. When policy-makers refused to deliver the community’s demands, MCFS founders took matters into their own hands and started the Making Changes Freedom School.

The after-school program provides homework help and academic support, as requested by students and parents in their original survey that asked the community what was needed. Additionally they hold a vast array of classes and activities based on students’ interests, ranging from “People’s History” to “Music As Poetry.”

This learning space is an example of community education because:

- [1] It is based on a geographic location and the people who live there.
- [2] The people who are involved share similar struggles, values, and visions.
- [3] They are committed to dialogue.
- [4] It grew from a community struggle for justice.
- [5] Everything about it (from rules, to activities, to language) are decided by the people in that community.
- [6] The ways of learning, communicating and living that are practiced in that space extend deeply into their neighborhood: in their family and friend networks, in their classrooms at school, in the park, and at the corner-store.

As anthropologists would say, this is a community of practice. Students are not only learning in a liberated way, they are practicing the tools of liberation that are necessary to change the inequities they face or witness in their world. And



Althea Baird (left) and Amber Woods recording at Windsor House in Vancouver, B.C.

communities of practice can and must grow from any learning space.

So, for the schools we visited who feel they are missing this social justice piece in their work, or who are struggling with the way that their ideological community is segregated from local community and/or community issues of inequity, let us consider this list of questions:

- [1] Who is currently participating in your learning space?
- [2] Why are they there?
- [3] Are their needs being met? How can you better meet their needs?
- [4] Who is not participating?
- [5] What about your space excludes these communities?
- [6] Are those things that you can and want to change in an authentic way?
- [7] How can you support those community's own efforts towards autonomy and democracy in their education?

3. SUPPORTING EDUCATION JUSTICE

In thinking through these questions, some people will come to the conclusion that their alternative learning space is

grounded in a physical community that is very homogenous, and is dominated by groups historically advantaged by educational institutions (white people, wealthy people etc.). AND they may conclude that "accessibility" (which may, in practice, look more like assimilation) may not be practical, or may not actually be a priority. Perhaps the goal of their school is simply providing a better environment to bring their kids up in. Fair enough.

And in this case, there are many ways that such educators and families can take part in education justice work outside of their alternative school day. They can network with and support groups working on education reform campaigns, and with alternative learning spaces in communities different than their own. They can offer their building as free meeting space, or provide child care for meetings. They can partake in marches, rallies, letter-writing and petition campaigns. They can hold fundraisers.

Resources, both emotional and material, are not scarce. And the possibilities are endless. It is time for the alternative learning networks to renew their commitment to democracy in education.

In 2008 we took a second tour around the country, showcasing a multimedia performance that combined the *I Want To Do This All Day: Redefining Learning and Reinventing Education* audio documentary with dance and film. After the show, the audience in each different city would gather to reflect on the state of learning and education in their own community.

One of the most shining moments of the DTAD performance tour took place at the Cass Corridor Community Center in Detroit, MI. After the performances, the small crowd arranged their chairs in a circle for a round-table discussion. Youth organizers shared their work in the Detroit Summer program and their creation of a hip hop audio documentary called "Rising Up From the Ashes: Chronicles of a Dropout." A 12 year old girl from a local after school program performed a cheer about self-love for the group. Students from Clonlara, an alternative school in Ann Arbor, MI testified to the power of student-directed learning. The force of connection was so strong in the overlap of each group's work.

Imagine the fierce potential for alternative education networks if such conversations were commonplace. When different communities working towards a common goal trust and support each other, learning extends past the confines of the school, democracy extends beyond the elite. Redefining accessibility, considering community education, and supporting education justice work are three means to this end.

Althea Baird lives in Philadelphia and is one half of the "I Want To Do This All Day: Redefining Learning and Reinventing Education" audio documentary production/direction team with co-conspirator Amber Woods. Althea currently works with young people bringing social justice into arts and media education. She is interested in the telling of truth. Contact her at althea.baird@gmail.com. For more information about the documentary and performance tour visit www.dothisallday.org. ●

Contemporary Home Schooling Practices and Philosophies

BY GEA D'MAREA BASSETT

The home schooling movement is not merely a rebellion against public schools by a random lot of libertarians, but the first significant wave of a new educational culture in the making.

— RON MILLER, *Creating Learning Communities: Models, Resources, and New Ways of Thinking About Teaching and Learning*

Although home schooling isn't new—it is the way families and communities learned before the rise of the public school system in the mid seventeenth century—it is making a comeback as a holistic pedagogy that is rooted in the natural world and that provides an alternative dialogue to repressive social structures. This contemporary form of home schooling also tends toward a certain style of socially active mothering, which Andrea O'Reilly has described as “empowered mothering.”

The philosophical foundations of contemporary home schooling can be traced back to several radical concepts regarding learning and education. Radical educational theorists such as John Dewey stated that the organism—the learner—plays an active and interactive role with the learning environment; Paulo Freire inspired the concept of a “critical pedagogy” and said that learners, to become liberated, must think critically about their education situation; Ivan Illich coined the term “deschooling”—a conscious rebellion against educational institutions that turned education and learning into a commodity. These radical concepts challenged traditional beliefs about learning, beliefs which assumed that learners were empty vessels to be “filled” with information; education should un-questioningly reinforce a patriarchal, colonial model; and experts and institutions were the best way to disperse knowledge to the public.

These radical theorists—Dewey, Freire, and Illich—also helped to inspire another generation of educational theorists, who focused more specifically on creating alternatives to the schoolhouse and on carving out home schooling as a valid and important learning method. A.S Neill, creator of the most famous free school, Summerhill, stated that children should be able to *choose* what they want to learn; John Holt created the first home schooling publication, *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS) in 1977 and coined the term “unschooling.” Bringing awareness to the inherent problems in institu-

tionalized learning and by creating learning alternatives that existed outside of institutions, these educational theorists primed the stage for contemporary home schooling.

A generation has passed since this first wave of contemporary home schooling took root. In 1978, the year I was born, my mother saw an episode of the Phil Donahue Show on which John Holt was promoting home schooling. My mom recalls the experience of hearing about this “new” way of learning: “I was elated! Overcome with joy, excitement, and exhilaration! YES! Someone, somewhere, was in support of what I wanted to do myself... I mailed John a note of excitement and thanks.” Holt responded to my mom with a postcard and an issue of the GWS newsletter. From there a dispersed and mostly unaware of each other handful of families began the unschooling experiment—a lifestyle of learning taken on without the support of schools or school teachers—and the movement was born. Now, 30 years later, these families have begun to connect and contemporary home schooling has become a highly accessible mode of researching and learning.

Taking on both a holistic and feminist stance, contemporary home schooling is becoming more than just a unique learning option; it is becoming a unified (albeit intentionally decentralized) lifestyle for more and more families. Holistic education places high value on authentic relationships, not only with people, but also with places and the environment, and notes how one's interaction with the environment alters the environment and vice versa. It strives to respect and develop the individual while, at the same time, it seeks to keep the individual connected to larger communities and a larger vision of the world. It strives to ask probing questions without an expected “right” answer.

THE CURRENT GENERATION

In a recent study I did on home schoolers in Seattle I found three main qualities:

- [1] They practice a critical pedagogy (they examine and deconstruct intentions behind education situations).
- [2] They engage in a holistic curriculum and lifestyle (they are individual-respecting, community-connected, and eco-aware).
- [3] The mothers practice empowered mothering (they are both mothers *and* agents of change toward a more egalitarian way of life).

Although I do not suggest that all home schoolers reflect these qualities, I will suggest that there is an ever-growing style of home schooling that is increasing in both awareness and size. I have begun to call these home schoolers “contemporary” because I believe that they represent a fresh and progressively new-age home schooling movement, one that is holistic, egalitarian, and intellectually savvy. However, before I expand, I must clarify that I neither intend to lump all home schoolers into any category, nor do I think that home schooling should be generalized. There are many ways to approach home schooling. One of the most unique qualities about home schooling, as both a life style and learning style, is that it is flexible, open-minded, and responsive to change.

Beth, one of the mothers in my study, is a single mother. She has a nine-year-old son, Costner. Beth lists Costner’s regular activities as Spanish and harpsichord lessons, tracking, plant identification and shelter building. Beth and Costner also take Non-Violent Communication (NVC) classes, volunteer at organic farms, visit libraries, parks, and museums, practice reading, writing, art, and engage in the duties of domestic labor, such as housecleaning. Beth shares her philosophy on home schooling:

I hold homeschooling to be a way to educate my son that supports life skills, choice, autonomy, freedom and a way to discover one’s passions for life. It eliminates judgment, rewards and punishment, and other means of evaluating that are used in schools to determine if the efforts of a particular child are “good enough.” It is my belief that, whatever a child does at that moment in time is holding a need for that particular child. ...We are taking this journey with care, honoring who we are and what we need to do in our lives.

Another mother in the study, Mel, is a married, stay-at-home mom and ex-lawyer who has three daughters under eight years old. Mel explains one of the reasons her family decided to home school:

I think that kids are much more individual than a chart of developmental milestones, and I felt that homeschooling would allow us to better tailor education to the needs of our specific kids...The reading example was the biggest one for us because it was so clear. Cindy was ready to read before the Waldorf schools are comfortable teaching letters. She would have been sorely disappointed to not have had the chance to learn to read, and I didn’t feel like it was a wise move to put off something when she was so excited about it. Maybe she would lose her interest by the time she was 7 and they wanted to teach her to read.

It can be noted that all of the mothers respect the unique needs of their individual children and acknowledge the need to expose their children to various experiences. All of the children in the study are engaged in community and practice some form of eco-awareness. None of the mothers in the study are certified teachers, yet most of them have studied education regulations, theories, and curriculum

on their own. One of the interesting things about contemporary home schooling is that it isn’t just for the children; parents also learn a lot through the process. Embracing the role of a contemporary home schooling mother, many of the mothers in the study showed how they too are learning through their mother-teacher role.

These women positioned themselves as critical, independent thinkers who, by drawing on alternative discourses and engaging in ideological work, questioned and critiqued certain social ideas and structures. This process led them to make more satisfying personal and mothering choices while engaging in practices that reflected their agentic power.

– ANDREA O’REILLY, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering*

EMPOWERED MOTHERING, EMPOWERED LEARNING

Contemporary home schooling has become a movement that operates both inside and outside of the home. During the last generation it has grown into social networks, which are growing into communities that support holistic and egalitarian relationships and social structures. Contemporary home schooling mothers tend to teach their children critical discourses and alternatives to dominator and repressive systems.

As the research has shown, the home schooling family structure is not limited to heterosexual, nuclear families; however, even in families where patriarchy is not a dominant issue within the home, it does remain an issue outside of the home, and in most cases the mothers realize that they must teach their children (although they do not use the specific term) a critical pedagogy. As such, the mothers in this study demonstrate the desire to be both progressive agents of

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change *and* to be mothers. They want to be home with their children and they want to demonstrate to their children that a women’s place is more than just in the home. They practice empowered mothering – a form of mothering that supports women in their mothering role *and* seeks to replace patriarchy with egalitarian systems.

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The Power of Choice

BY CARLO RICCI

Last summer my five-year-old daughter decided that she wanted to play soccer. A few of her very close friends were signing up and so she asked us to sign her up as well. Thus started my initiation into the world of little league soccer. Sure, my daughter was thrilled at getting her new soccer shoes and outfit, but the excitement ended there. For her the beautiful game was not such a beautiful game after all. Watching and learning from her by listening about her phenomenological experience with soccer defamiliarized and enhanced my understanding of the game of soccer. My five-year-old helped me to re-see soccer from her eyes.

So, how did she see soccer? For Annabel, being on the soccer pitch was not a comfortable place. For her, soccer was a violent and aggressive sport. Annabel is a very loving and empathetic person and soccer did not fit into her paradigm. She embodied the soccer experience as a competitive war where all the children were expected to fight and push and do whatever they had to in order to get at the ball and kick it into the other team's net. All the while, adults were on the sidelines yelling and urging the aggression on and cheering when their favored team scored. In addition, the adults were cheering the goal while the team that was scored on was feeling sad about having let the other fans down and so this made the cheering all the more mean from Annabel's being.

My point is not to argue that soccer is a mean, violent and aggressive sport and that everyone should stop playing it, my point is simply to share a little girl's phenomenological experience with soccer and to make a larger ethical point around the power of choice. I want to make clear that the parents and the other players may not have been intentionally acting aggressively, but what matters is that this is how they were interpreted as acting and I had come to understand them as I was initiated into the thinking of a five-year-old girl.

Now, for me what follows is the most important part of this piece. Annabel clearly did not want to be there. By now, we had spent quite a bit of money that was nonrefundable and she had made a commitment to the team. This was not even an issue for me; ultimately, the choice of whether to continue or not was not up to me or anybody else other than Annabel. If she did not want to play soccer anymore for whatever reason she did not have to and we supported any decision she wanted to make. Unfortunately, many people did not and do not see it this way and when I started to share the story formally or informally I was challenged as people tried to convince me on how wrong I was in not forcing her to continue to play. They asked me if I had not realized that by allowing her to quit that I was teaching her to be irresponsible. I was teaching her that commitment and responsibility to others does not matter.

What I should have done, I was told, is to force her to go and teach her that once she commits to something she has to see it through and that if after the season she felt that she did not want to play soccer again that would be fine but that she should not be allowed to quit mid-season and especially not after so few games. Annabel was not the only young person who was feeling this way and some of the other parents shared with me how their daughters also did not want to go, but that once they got there they would have a great time and so the crying and protests that happened before the games is just what children do.

Having thought about this a lot over the last few months and having had conversations in groups or one on one with

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many people about this, I am more convinced than ever that giving children the power of choice is the ethically correct thing to do. During one exchange a woman suggested we transfer the scenario to a drama production rather than a soccer pitch and she thought that would make me see the error of my ways. She framed it in the following way: What if Annabel was a lead actor in a play and decided to just get up and quit, then what? What would happen to the production? Would this be fair to the others? It then occurred to me that there are situations where this has happened. It is not unheard of that a lead in a play had to excuse herself from the production either temporarily or permanently. What happens in those cases? Someone else takes over and the show goes on.

But more importantly, consider this, I asked: What if Annabel had broken her leg and could not continue for that reason, then what? Then she has a legitimate excuse and could and should be excused, was the consensus. Are we suggesting then that a broken leg is more serious than a broken spirit? Holistically speaking, we are made up of at least mind, body

and spirit and so if her spirit is being threatened should she not be allowed to act according to her own wishes?

From my perspective then, what did Annabel learn? She learned that she has a voice, that what she thinks matters and that she has the power to control her own life. She learned that her resistance to competitive sports and activities is not abnormal and that there are others who are willing to support her views around the importance of cooperation and what she perceived to be a negative aggressive place. She learned that she is a human being with agency and she can exercise it when she feels she needs. She also learned that she can trust me to support her and many other things that I cannot yet imagine.

CONCLUSION

Children are very capable of having profound and deep philosophical discussions and I believe that it is important that we give them the space and place where these conversations can take place. I share with my children about how other children do not have the same opportunities to exercise their agency as they do and that they should understand that. It is not enough that they live in freedom but I believe they need to understand what that means and they clearly can.

What I have noticed is that with freedom responsibility does follow. Freedom and responsibility are not separate

things but part of the same construct. Unfortunately, through language games this connection gets divided and the consequences are evident in the atrocities that get reported in the papers daily. My hope in writing this is that the dialogue around young people and the power of choice will continue to grow and that young people will be trusted. I invite all of you now to trust, respect and empower the young people that cross your path and to encourage others to do the same: May this notion spread and multiply.

Carlo Ricci currently teaches in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University and he founded and edits the online *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* (JUAL). He tries to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner centered principles in all of his classes. Everything of value that he has learned, he has learned outside of formal schooling. He has never taken a course in school connected to what he now teaches and writes about. He has taught in elementary and high school. He has also taught in undergraduate, teacher education programs and graduate programs. He continues to heal from the wounds inflicted on him by formal schooling. He has two daughters ages 4 and 6 that he hopes will decide to unschool. ●

Contemporary Home Schooling

Continued from page 10

Andrea O'Reilly notes that "only an empowered mother can empower children, and children can only be empowered by an empowered mother." Empowered mothering requires that mothers have their own social involvements and have time to develop their self. In doing so, they will be able to provide their children with the knowledge and resources to do the same. It is a form of mothering that strives to teach children to acknowledge and think beyond gender-role stereotypes, to develop critical thinking, and to support holistic living. Empowered mothering is a discourse and a way of life that challenges repressive structures and is making way for a contemporary way of living and learning.

Pat, a home schooling mother of two children under twelve years old, considers herself a feminist. Although her husband is the primary income earner for their family, Pat practices empowered mothering by the ways she structures her children's learning and by continuing to engage herself in activities that she values and enjoys (Pat practices herbalism, works in community gardens, and works with Native American communities). Mel, quoted earlier, notes that she explicitly teaches her children about gender stereotypes and encourages them to create their own path. She says, "I do make a point of telling the kids that I have a job other than being their mom and educator (I am a freelance writer), because I want them to see that women do more and can do more, and I think that concrete examples are good. I also

want them to feel supported in doing whatever they want in their lives, professional or not."

Contemporary home schoolers tend toward certain general qualities within their practice and philosophy. They came to practice home schooling because they questioned the intentions behind education institutions and believed that they could connect to a more liberated method of learning. Within their home schooling practice, they embrace a holistic approach toward living, which has a sense of eco-awareness and values both individual and community development, and they tend to practice empowered mothering, recognizing the need to strive toward egalitarian social structures and to make time for themselves. Connie, one mother from the West Seattle Home School Group simply stated that within home schooling, "the key is growing yourself."

Gea D'Marea Bassett lives in Seattle with her partner, Doug and their homeschooling son, Zizi. She was unschooled from birth until college and has an MA in Education from Goddard College. Aside from writing, traveling, cooking, and wearing flip-flops, her current projects include staying engaged with her local home school community, establishing a haven of exotic edible plants in her backyard, and enjoying time with her family. She can be reached at geabassett@yahoo.com. ●

Moving Beyond Age Discrimination

BY ELANA DAVIDSON

Children are the only classification of citizens in our society against whom discriminatory abuse is not only legal, but actually encouraged and carried out by laws themselves.

BRIAN DOMINICK¹

Discrimination against young people is rarely recognized, often accepted as normal, and is supported by virtually all of our political and legal systems. It has become so normalized that most people do not recognize it for what it is. The same traits, behaviors and beliefs we consider oppressive, inhumane, discriminatory and which are often illegal when applied to adults are used and accepted in the treatment and oppression of young people and children. We consider such practices as limiting people's movement in the world, making decisions that affect them without their participation or consent, and invasion of privacy and personal and physical space without just cause, to name a few, as violations of personal freedom and rights and yet these are common experiences for children and young people.

Not only do we condone behavior towards children and young people that would otherwise be considered oppressive, we often deny to children those things we consider fundamental rights of free people. "Whatever else might be useful about differentiations between adults and children have been rendered obscure by massive exaggerations of adult's illegitimate authority over kids. Maturing to adulthood has come to mean a process of submission to social norms established by elites and notably, existing adult society."²

While oppression of children parallels that of other oppressed groups, it has its own unique dynamics. Every person on the planet is or once was a child. Those in a subordinate position eventually become part of a dominant group.³ So any adult who is now in a dominant position, was once also in the subordinate position, and all children experiencing child oppression will eventually gain membership in the dominant group. Maybe it is this dynamic that allows us to overlook the constant infringement on (or non existence of) children's rights, liberties and autonomy. Children will eventually be adults with all the privileges and rights that adulthood entails, so somehow we have accepted the subjugation and oppression of children, as they will eventually "grow out of it" by becoming adults, and if the dynamics and chains are not broken,

they will perpetuate the same oppression of the next generation of young people.

Many parallels can be drawn between how dominant groups have perceived the "other" throughout history and the way we currently relate to and view children.⁴ Our experience of children and youth today has as much to do with the society and culture in which they are shaped as it has to do with the actual nature and ability of children and young people. It is not a natural category, but one that has been socially constructed.⁵ "Those changes which are common among people in a society are usually thought of as 'natural' even if they are a result of social conditioning rather than genetic predetermination."⁶

When one takes a critical look at the justification for the subordination and disenfranchisement of youth and children, the arguments for exclusion such as children being irrational, amoral, inexperienced or incapable of deciding what is in their own best interests start to fall apart. (I examine some of these arguments more thoroughly in my paper "Paternalism and Age

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Discrimination Toward Children," available through email from letkidsbefree@yahoo.com) We have built up a system of ideology that justifies the subjugation and subordination of the young "for their own good" that will continue to perpetuate itself unless we take a critical look at it.⁷ How do we justify the subordination and discrimination against young people and are our justifications warranted?

AGE AS GROUNDS FOR DISCRIMINATION?

Most of the arguments for limiting children and protecting them from themselves come from the basic principle that children are incapable of acting for themselves, of making

good decisions or of having a valid understanding of themselves and their own best interests. If we believe these things about children then the web of other behaviors that we use to restrict limit and control children, seem totally necessary, justifiable and good. We have perceived children for so long as immature and incompetent that we have barred them from participating in activities that allow them to mature and gain competence in the world. These ideas are based more on our sentiments about children, however, than on the reality of what children, if they are allowed, are actually capable.⁸ Age in and of itself is neither a measure of competence nor of maturity, but it is constantly used to justify the discrimination against children.⁹

Another argument for age discrimination against children and young people is their lack of experience and perceived immaturity and incompetence. The way we address these issues, perceived or real, generally serves to reinforce them rather than to assist an inexperienced person to become more experienced or to gain maturity and competence. Jean Baker Miller, in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, discusses temporary inequality, such as that exists between a more experienced person and a less experienced person—adult and a child for example. “The ‘superior’ party presumably has more of some ability or valuable quality which she/he is supposed to impart to the ‘lesser’ person... The ‘superior’ person is supposed to engage with the ‘lesser’ in such a way as to bring the lesser member up to full parity... The trouble with this type of inequality,” she writes “is that they exist within a context of a second type of inequality... which teaches us how to enforce inequality but not how to make the journey from unequal [having less knowledge ability or experience] to equal.”¹⁰

Lack of experience in a given area does often prohibit one from participation from that activity. We often require that one prove their experience or competence before they are allowed to participate in a given activity, especially when there is a high level of risk involved. We require a license or other sorts of proof before we trust people with certain skills. We would not want someone who has no proof of experience—and who does not meet a certain standard of ability—to perform surgery. These restrictions to participation make sense. Anyone who cannot fulfill the minimum requirements for a task should not be allowed to participate unsupervised in such a task until the required skills have been mastered. This is true of anyone. Once one can meet these requirements, then participation in such activities should be granted. The trouble is that we connect inexperience directly with age and then age becomes the determiner of someone’s ability to participate, rather than whether or not they have the requisite skills. “What needs to be demonstrated is that the lacks of a particular child or children of a certain age are relevant to the specific set of skills being discussed.”¹¹

Age has very little to do with having the ability to participate in a plethora of activities from which we bar young people. In many cases they are barred simply because of their age and not because we have any real proof of their lack of ability to participate appropriately or effectively. Barring any other group based on a characteristic not relevant to the activity in which they seek to participate would be considered discrimination,

and if we allow ourselves not to be blind to it, it is with young people as well.

What proof do we have, also, that age is married with experience, responsibility, maturity and competence? There are plenty of immature, incompetent and irresponsible adults who lack certain levels of experience, but we do not bar them, on these grounds, from full participation in adult society. On the flip side, young people, given the chance, can prove themselves entirely mature, competent and responsible in a number of areas. While age does grant to some extent greater understanding and experience in life, it is by no means a determining factor of the qualities mentioned above and, therefore, people should not be excluded from activities solely on grounds of age.

While most cultures of the world today are perpetuating to some degree an oppressive relationship between adults and children,¹² if we become aware of such dynamics, we can shift our thinking and our culture in ways that minimize their impact and build a more cooperative and supportive culture for all of us. Just as Martin Luther King Jr. had the vision of a time when people are judged “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” we should not judge or restrict people purely on their age, but by their current and potential capabilities and by the quality of the persons they are.

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Elana Davidson is a self-directed learner who has been studying, working and playing with children in diverse settings and parts of the world since escaping from high school. She has a bachelor’s degree in Child Study and Human Social Dynamics from Burlington College, which she gained largely through life experience and self-directed learning. She is particularly interested in examining cultural belief and re-structuring culture in ways that support the freedom, autonomy and self-determination of children and young people. ●

Let Them Eat Laptops

BY BEN FALK

The One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) organization has become a colossal social movement. It has garnered tens of millions in funding, engaged the interest of prime ministers and professional sports superstars alike, and attracted support from the UN and thousands of individual donors and organizations around the world. There is a network of nation-funded websites for this program already set up in dozens of countries facilitating the movement of laptops into their poor communities probably more effectively than food aid has ever been organized.

Motivated by the notion that modernized education (math, science, language, etc.) leads to “positive” development, internet guru Nicolas Negroponte launched the movement to make an affordable, durable, fixable computer that can be distributed to millions of world’s poorest people—much like how we’ve attempted to distribute food aid for decades. Amazingly this movement is incredibly popular despite the fact that we’ve already tried this model of development and it didn’t work.

But we already know what a world with one laptop per child looks like: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, obesity, social and ecological illiteracy, loss of language and reading skills, retardation of motor skills, and a general trend towards young people becoming less capable at developing basic life skills.

Technology transfer from the first world to third has been the focus of international development programs since the 1960’s. We thought that the Green Revolution would make the world a better place by increasing crop yields through exporting the tools of the industrial revolution—chemicals, tractors, sprayers, hybrid seeds. The One Laptop Per Child experiment assumes that the world will become a better place by exporting the tools of the digital revolution—computers, software and internet access—to the developing world.

Incredibly, zeal for this program, and for the very *idea* that putting digital technology in the hands of a hungry child is actually a good thing, has been largely unques-

tioned. It’s as though we’ve supplanted one model for the next, simply repackaging “industrial” as “digital.” The limiting factor is not technology but technique. After spending billions on old-model development efforts we’re realizing that simply exporting stuff to other places doesn’t help in the long term. In fact, it actually hurts. It’s the opposite of “teaching a man to fish.” Why is exporting laptops any different? It turns out that the OCPL website makes this clear; they are ‘exporting *education*, not really computers (they just *look* like computers):

“Why give a laptop to a child in the emerging world? If you replace the word ‘laptop’ with ‘education’ the answer becomes clear. You don’t wait to educate until all other challenges are resolved. You educate at the same time because it’s such an important part of all the other solutions.”

So the idea is to ship out *Education* in boxes, millions of crates of education that will lift these people from poverty, from their villages and into the modern Developed world where we are free and live good lives in cities and work in offices. At laptops. But we already know what a world with *Education* and one laptop per child looks like: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, obesity, social and ecological illiteracy, loss of language and reading skills, retardation of motor skills, and a general trend towards young people becoming less capable at developing basic life skills.

The question that’s being missed by this well intended but absurdly over-simplistic approach is: “If the laptop is just a symbol for education, what *kind* of education are we exporting?” Is it simply the World Wide Web? Who’s the author of and purveyor of this Education? Microsoft? Apple? Facebook? Who owns it? Bill Gates? Rupert Murdoch? The U.N.? Are we filling this laptop with programs and content that show people how to grow food and build soil sustainably so they can feed themselves? Is it going to help them learn how build a house, harvest food, get along with one another? Or is this the kind of Education that will help them to see that life is better in the city than their little village, that they need a degree from a University and would be much better off working in an office than herding goats?

So this project begs the question: Is this the best use of millions of dollars? Is this the best we can do to truly help people in great need? Is this “teaching a man to fish” or simply handing over a symbol of the first world thinking it will beget a just first world for all?

The One Laptop Per Child and the paradigm that fuels it says implicitly that:

- Computers are necessary for learning: You can't really "get ahead" in the world or learn what's most important without one. You can't have "adequate education" without one.
- The internet contains more important information than the real world around you does.
- Email and internet connections inherently empower children. Without them a child's connectivity to the world is limited. A child's senses and direct contact with the sensible world is not as important or relevant as the virtual world accessible through the internet.

We've already learned the hard way that simply increasing the technological sophistication of a society does not beget equality, justice, peace or any other measure of a higher quality of life in that society. The One Laptop Per Child project is a sham in the same way the Green Revolution was a fraud. And it's fueled by the same implicit assumptions that have fueled the industrial age. We've inherited the residue of that age and all of the poverty and injustice we were promised it would alleviate. This is the same old wolf, now in smart new sheep's clothing – a disguise that now reads "information" and "technology" instead of industrialization.

The world does not suffer for lack of computers, but it continues to suffer for lack of true needs: things like drinking water, nourishing food, fertile soil, sound shelter, safety from warfare and oppression. These are elemental realities

not influenced by a trillion 1's and 0's in a billion laptops. How about 1 fruit tree per child? 1 cow per child. Or 1 goat per child. 1 bucket of compost per child and 1 teacher who can share the skills of growing 1 kilogram of vegetables in that compost? The future is in evolving our technique more than our technology. Throwing laptops at problems won't alleviate them any more than throwing guns at them will.

We've already learned the hard way that simply increasing the technological sophistication of a society does not beget equality, justice, peace or any other measure of a higher quality of life in that society.

It's time to wake up from the techno-dream. 1's and 0's don't change reality, they don't offer up education or empowerment. Fortunately, the world's still analogue, tangible, earthly. And real solutions require hard work, investments of time and technique, skill and love. These aren't simply exported to other cultures but can only be cultivated and modeled in our home places, understood, mastered, then shared through exchanges of technique and appropriate technology going in both directions from 1st world to 3rd and, equally, from the developing world back to this digitized world that's sorely in need of another way.

If One Laptop Per Child really wants to help children, then pack those machines and the boxes they come in full of nutrients, rock powders, mycelium spores, seeds, soil, so at least when the machine breaks it doesn't have to be trashed into the local burn pit but can be fed to their pigs or have a tree planted on top of it.

Ben Falk, M.A.L.D., directs Whole Systems Design, LLC, an ecological design-build firm located in Vermont's Mad River Valley. Whole Systems Design's work focuses on edible, therapeutic and learning landscapes that connect people with nature via campus food gardens, outdoor classrooms, rain gardens, living roofs, and many other sustainable campus redevelopment strategies. See www.wholesystemsdesign.com ●



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On Spiral Dynamics and the Future of Education

BY RON MILLER AND CAROL GREENHOUSE

At last year's AERO conference, Ron Miller led a workshop on spiral dynamics theory and what it means for the educational alternatives movement. We believe this model helps to explain why holistic, learner-centered education remains on the margins of modern schooling—why it's "alternative"—even as it shows that a cultural shift has opened the door for holistic ways of learning to go mainstream. Spiral dynamics is controversial, and a lively debate arose last year; as a result, Miller will broach the subject again at this year's conference in a workshop titled "Reinventing the School System Using Spiral Dynamics." This article—co-authored by *Ode* magazine staffer and alternative homeschooling parent Carol Greenhouse—provides some background for that dialogue.

If you've been a student in the public school system, you've memorized your share of facts: the square root of pi, the chemistry table, the events of 1492. If you enrolled in one of today's alternative schools, on the other hand, your education would encourage you to be self-directed and self-disciplined, serve your community, bridge interpersonal differences and cultivate peace. Spiral dynamics is a sophisticated theory of cultural evolution which suggests that this difference represents a shift in society's idea of what we need to know—and paints an encouraging picture of what could lie ahead.

Spiral dynamics was developed by psychologist Clare Graves in the 1950s and '60s and laid out by organizational consultants Don Beck and Christopher Cowan in the 1996 book *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* to explain how the foundational values and beliefs of the dominant worldview at any given time represent a culture's adaptation to changing historical and environmental conditions. These bedrock ideas are called "values MEMES" or "vMEMES"—unconscious, deep-level bio-psycho-social-cultural structures that shape institutions, including educational ideas and practices.

According to Graves, vMEMES can't be strategically manipulated or advanced, but evolve naturally. "What I am proposing is that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating spiraling process marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behavior systems to newer, higher-order systems as man's existential problems change."¹

Spiral dynamics uses colors to differentiate these systems. From the earliest forms of cultural organization (identified by

the colors beige and purple), through feudal and authoritarian systems (red and blue) into modern, democratic societies (orange and green), human consciousness has been responding to its environment with greater sophistication, resulting in a progressively more holistic understanding of the cosmos and our place in it. "We live in a potentially open system with an infinite number of modes of living available to us," Beck and Cowan write in *Spiral Dynamics*.²

Isn't this a fundamental belief of holistic, learner-centered pedagogy? One of our primary complaints about conventional, standardized schooling is that it authorizes one mode of living as culturally correct and coerces young people to follow it, rather than supporting the creativity of adaptive intelligence in an open system. The educational alternatives movement, at its core, is aligned with systems theories such as spiral dynamics that recognize the possibility of open-ended evolution. According to cultural historians such as Thomas Berry, Richard Tarnas, Charles Eisenstein and others, the moment of history in which we live is one of the significant periods of cultural transition from one system of meaning to another. Our worldview is shifting before our eyes, and ideas about education are a part of that shift.

THE GREENING OF EDUCATION

This shift became evident during the cultural earthquake of the 1960s. Across many social institutions and fields of inquiry, the dominant belief system rooted in blue and orange vMEMES (a culture that combines authoritarian nationalism and coercive moralism with the competitive striving of free enterprise) was challenged by emerging green and yellow vMEMES that embrace participatory democracy and self-actualization. The public school system, a manifestation of blue/orange values, was consequently challenged by the rise of alternative movements such as free schools, Montessori and Waldorf education, unschooling, and movements for "humanistic" and, later, "holistic" education.

From the 1970s on, the dominant culture sought to reassert its control (as spiral dynamics predicts it will) through educational policies that culminated in "No Child Left Behind." Public schooling became even more deeply embedded in blue/orange vMEMES. Nevertheless, the emerging vMEMES have continued to expand their influence, exemplified by the growth of educational alternatives. Participants at the Alternative Education Resource Organization's annual conferences, despite their diverse teaching methods, share the desire to

see the linear, competitive, hierarchical, cognitively based framework of mainstream education replaced by a model that prizes nurturance, freedom of choice, individualism, equality, respect, social development, cooperation and community.

In the context of modern education, any such view is radical. To the orange vMEME from which green is emerging, education driven by children's interests is nothing less than an invitation to anarchy, leading as it may away from national dominance and material success. Among those who've used the model extensively—Beck, for example, worked closely with former prisoner Nelson Mandela after he was elected president and moved to end apartheid in South Africa—the shorthand for the orange paradigm is “strive drive.” It's no coincidence that with orange at the helm, America rose to dominate the world stage and put a man on the moon.

The educational alternatives movement, at its core, is aligned with systems theories such as spiral dynamics that recognize the possibility of open-ended evolution.

With more than 90 percent of the world's population still at or below the orange vMEME, according to contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber, it isn't hard to understand why alternative education principles haven't yet penetrated the collective imagination; too much of the group remains under the spell of conventional wisdom. “The center of gravity of our United States society is in the range of the blue/orange memes,” writes Wilber. “A person moving past that level feels a downward pull from the mass of society.”³ Still, if spiral dynamics theory is valid, the rise of what we call “alternative education” is inevitable as a critical mass of humanity gradually moves to embrace green principles.

BEYOND THE EDGE

Unfortunately for those who already embody the ideals ascribed to the green vMEME, this may not be the cause for celebration we imagine—since by the time the transformation has occurred, our beliefs may have evolved too. That isn't to say we'll no longer cherish human rights or networking. Wilber uses the phrase “transcend and include” to convey the idea that as the “truths” for which we'd fall on our swords become part of our operating systems, we're left to take on new ideas.⁴

Green values are already being stretched by the emergence in alternative circles of the yellow vMEME, which puts more importance on the individual than the group and prizes spontaneity and flexibility. Yellow educators may champion

unschooling, for example, rooted as it is in the idea that each individual, regardless of age, has a unique compass to guide him or her. In this sense, unschooling is more radical than the democratic ideals progressive educators are working to bring to public schools. But cultural evolution does not end with the individualism of the yellow vMEME.

The spiral of evolving cultural consciousness causes a society to alternate between independence and interdependence—what Graves called “express-self belief/behavior” and “sacrifice-self belief/behavior”—therein shaping the lower-case “memes”—those surface-level perceptions, morals and ideas we experience and espouse—including our perspective on what children should be taught. The independence proclaimed by yellow level educators is not the final word, but a stepping stone toward a more subtle and sophisticated interdependence.

According to Spiral Dynamics Integral (SDi), the organization born of the shared work of Beck and Wilber, the next vMEME is turquoise, which promises holism and the ability to operate at many levels from a spiritual, rather than cognitive, base. That leads some to believe that to transcend and include both the egalitarian green vMEME and the freeform self-determination of yellow might deliver us to a realm characterized by the blossoming of the whole person in society to a degree that's still hard to imagine.

Compare this to where we stand, a culture of individuals at home in our heads, at best loosely connected to body and spirit. Very few schools anywhere provide a fully developed holistic education, nor do we have authentic “integral” primary education, to use the term coined by Wilber to mean the collaborative operation of body, mind, heart and soul.

If the champions of spiral dynamics prove right, that's the direction education is headed: toward a consciousness-based curriculum designed to educate the individual to operate in a dance with the world (green), learn to take fluid, autonomous steps that arise from a strong center (yellow) and master the art of processing experience integrally, our physical and spiritual embodiment as advanced as our cognitive mastery (turquoise).

The turquoise vMEME, then, is the leading edge of cultural evolution at this time, and portends a renaissance in education. We're not there yet. But we're witnessing the spectacular unraveling of the economic and political structures that represent the dominance of blue/orange culture, and it's likely to accelerate. Those of us working for learner-centered alternatives contribute vital energy to this process. If the spiral dynamics model proves accurate, the incessant pull of cultural evolution will ultimately take us to the turquoise level and beyond, transforming what and how we learn. ●

Notes

1. Beck and Cowan, p. 28
2. Beck and Cowan, p. 29.
3. “The Integral Vision at the Millennium”: Excerpts from “Introduction to Volume Seven of the Collected Works by Ken Wilber”
4. *Introducing Ken Wilber: Concepts for An Evolving World*, Lew Howard, pp. 212

Education Circle of Change

BY ISAAC GRAVES

In April I participated in a very interesting gathering called *Education Circle of Change*, which brought together organizers and activists from a wide variety of backgrounds representing a great diversity of educational work and thought. The event was organized by Spirit in Action, which specializes in facilitating and supporting movement building. In their own words, Spirit in Action works “...to create effective, sustainable movement networks anchored in the principles of diversity of voices, healing divisions, building connections and using our hearts and vision to create deep and lasting change.”

The invitation announced that “the *Education Circle of Change* is an initiative to advance existing movement building in education and to bring different elements of the movement together.” The premise of the gathering was “the belief that high quality learning opportunities can be created for everyone that embody and advance the values of democracy, justice and equity and that are holistic in approach and humanizing in practice.” As an educator and representative of AERO, the drive to attend this gathering came out of its simple, yet powerful goal: “to seed and cultivate a vibrant, vision-based network for educational transformation.”

The venue was the Children’s Defense Fund’s stunning Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, thirty miles northwest of Knoxville. The gathering was organized around a number of reflective exercises where we discussed key questions pertaining to our vision of a larger movement. Questions addressed topics such as “what our ideal world would be as it relates to education” and “what the challenges and difficulties standing in the way are” among many others. In less than two days, I found a surprising sense of community and camaraderie with my fellow attendees. I was reminded of an article by Chris Mercogliano where he described the Community (capitalization intended) of The Free School in Albany, NY. In what he felt was the best articulation of the essence of community, Chris used a portion from M. Scott Peck’s classic treatise on the subject, *The Different Drum*:



Mariana Castañeda and Starlet Lee from Detroit Summer and Allied Media Projects, with AERO’s Isaac Graves and AERO conference keynote speaker Khalif Williams at the Education Circle of Change. Photo by Jayeesha Dutta.

“If we are going to use the word meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, and to delight in each other, making the other’s condition our own.”

In our limited time, I believe the *Education Circle of Change* made huge strides towards reaching Peck’s beautiful description of *Community*. One important aspect to this gathering was the size. With less than thirty individuals in attendance, the opportunity to connect on a deeper level and network in a more meaningful way was greatly increased. Learning about all the work and projects my fellow attendees were involved in left me proud to know I was in some way a part of something greater and more significant going on in the world of education today.

Towards the end of my first day in attendance I met Gail Spotted Tail. Gail is an early childhood educator from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, who works to incorporate the Lakota language and culture into the daily lives of their children and families. This effort, Wohpe Ekta Woglakab,

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Book Review

If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom: Inspiring Love, Creativity, and Intelligence in Middle School Kids

By Bernie Schein

Sentient Publications (www.sentientpublications.com/)
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REVIEWED BY TAL BIRDSEY

John Dewey's great teacher George Sylvester Morris believed the essential spirit of education was "a free teacher face to face with a free student." Bernie Schein's book *If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom: Inspiring Love, Creativity, and Intelligence in Middle School Kids* demonstrates what happens when that rare occasion occurs: an impassioned master teacher, unburdened by political mandates, bureaucratic entanglement or administrative control, free to build structures of meaning relevant to his students' lives.

Holden Caulfield, the character in the book's title, is from J.D. Salinger's classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Schein holds Holden up as the symbolic figure of the adolescent desperate to discover and articulate who he is; a boy whose schools have failed him; and a child in danger of dissociating from his most tender feelings. Schein's book shows how by teaching directly to the heart of his students every kind of adolescent, even Holden, can be reached; and by teaching to the heart we may find that all students contain capacious, creative intelligences waiting to be born over and over again.

A principal and teacher in public schools in Mississippi and South Carolina and then a lead teacher at the independent Paideia School in Atlanta, Schein spent forty years in classrooms immersed in his students' emotional, intellectual, psychological, and creative lives, working, as he writes, to discover, as his students do, that "the history of the world—the great, classical, universal themes of history and literature—is in the heart of each child."

The book assiduously avoids educational jargon and academic theorizing. The book, like Schein's teaching, is centered wholly on his adolescent students—their needs, hopes, dreams, questions, and feelings. "My program—art, creativity—if nothing else might serve to place feelings where they ought to be, in the natural order of things, in learning, for example, in the home, among friends, in the classroom," Schein writes. The natural order of things, according to Schein, is, always, the heart first. Teach the kids how to open the veins of feeling and intellect will come along brilliantly in its own time.

What happens in Schein's classroom—a community, we discover, of unsurpassed openness and intimacy—is anything but conventional. Every topic, conflict, feeling, gesture, reaction, motive, and idea is explored; nothing is taboo.

The classroom is alive with unbridled passion, poetry, ribald humor, and piercing insights, mainly from the kids themselves. We are witness to "Bernie," as his students called him, going to outrageous lengths to discover who his students are so they may, in turn, discover the hidden parts of themselves. He leaps across a table to challenge one student who is lying; when another student, Ian, does "fairly good" work, Schein expels him for six weeks until Ian returns with a "skyscraper" of magnificent work. When Norman, the class-district attorney, has been caught stealing from his classmates, Schein clutches his own wallet and shouts, "Norman, I love you. I love you. Is my money safe?"

When another boy, Warren, is accused of bullying and demeaning kids in the class, Schein and the students confront Warren directly. The class discovers that Warren *wants* to talk about it: he wants to know himself, to see better, to understand the feelings behind his actions. Schein asks if the accusations are true, then pivots: "No, wait; you tell me first, Warren. What's the truth? I promise, whatever it is, you'll feel better afterwards...All I'm asking for is the truth, Warren. I'll believe you, whatever you tell. You won't regret it."

What is uncommon is the ferocity, faith and openness with which Schein addresses them. He models what it means for a teacher to have the humility to be taught by his students; to trust that *they* know something of the great passions that animate mankind; and to believe that they can express it.

We can hear Auden's hope hovering close by: "In the deserts of the heart,/ Let the healing fountains start." Schein's portrayals of his students show that who they are as students is tied inextricably to the stories of their lives: Amy, who has been sexually abused; Riley, a compulsive putdown artist; Raquel, whose father died and who is paralyzed by the feeling that his death was her fault; Pasha Zybinski, immigrated from Russia, trying to liberate his artistic power; Danny, suffering in school with Attention Deficit Disorder but whose liberation lies in his learning that he is nevertheless gifted beyond measure; Jamila Cade, an African-American girl who is not sure whether she should act "white" or "black"; and Marvin Pazol, who, Schein writes, "suffered a universal American dilemma: he had lost his authentic voice, which was too frightening and painful for him to hear. To find it, courage was required. 'I'm afraid I'm gay,' he told the class."

These are not uncommon problems in schools. What *is* uncommon is the ferocity, faith and openness with which Schein addresses them. He models what it means for a teacher

to have the humility to be taught by his students; to trust that *they* know something of the great passions that animate mankind; and to believe that they can express it.

Throughout *If Holden Caulfield Were in My Classroom* we watch Schein bringing his students face-to-face with indifference and cynicism, leading them, sometimes following them, as they confront loneliness and alienation—the very emotional state in which Holden was ensnared. Of Holden, Schein writes, “Blind to himself, he’s blind to his world. So are my students initially. Blind to themselves, they are blind to him.” Schein’s aim then, simply and essentially, is to teach his students to see themselves—“in my mind, the ultimate form of intelligence. To see, and be able to express what you see...Kids want the truth, for the simple reason that, as the old saying goes, the truth sets them free.”

The actual stories written by the students in Schein’s class—the truth—are interspersed liberally through the book. These stories demonstrate that something miraculous consistently occurred between Schein and his students, underscoring Schein’s belief that emotional fluency and honesty is the prerequisite for great art and meaningful intelligence. Readers may have difficulty believing the stories—incredulity directed either at the way Schein taught or at the exquisite beauty of his students’ writing, thoughts, and epiphanies.

Like Doubting Thomases, readers may wonder if the dialogue constructed in Schein’s classroom is possible in *any*

classroom. For that reason alone this book should be essential reading for new teachers and veterans alike so that notions of what is possible in the middle-school classroom can be expanded. Most helpfully, a section is included at the end headed “For Teachers,” in which Schein explains how his classroom was structured, how much time he allotted for curriculum, how he collaborated with parents, and what kinds of boundaries are necessary for such a direct method of teaching.

Dewey wrote: “Failure of man to be himself. I can imagine no deeper ruin.” This is the looming tragedy, which underlies Holden Caulfield’s search for authenticity and love. But what would happen if Holden Caulfield *were* in Schein’s classroom? “I think he’d have a blast,” answers Schein. And not because of standardized testing or an enlightened curriculum. Holden would have a blast, it appears, because he would learn to see himself. He’d come alive and his heart would enlarge. Holden, like Schein’s students, might learn to write and speak with beauty, clarity, and passion, pass his exam on the history of the ancient Egyptians, and, at long last, pick up the phone and call old Jane Gallagher.

Schein concludes the book and forty years of teaching middle-schoolers: “Hell, I think I love them all. How could you not, particularly when you truly get to know them?” This is the hope-filled challenge he offers: how to know the students in the classroom and put them, and their hearts, truly, at the center. ●

Education Circle of Change

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which translates to “Through the nest they speak their language” is just one of the many profound examples that were shared throughout the event.

I credit much of the event’s overall success to the interactive, movement-filled facilitation which seemed grounded in community and interpersonal connection. Facilitators included Linda Stout from Spirit in Action and Shilpa Jain, from YES! and Shikshantar.

In Shilpa’s words, “YES! is an organization that focuses on the intersection of self-change, interpersonal change, and systemic change. It tries to give those involved in social change key skills, community, and reflective space to be able to be more effective and sustainable in their lives and work. The organization hosts week long gathering called Jams, which bring together thirty people or so committed to sharing space.”

She went on to explain that, “Shikshantar is a movement dedicated to eliminating the monopoly of schooling as a primary or only means of learning in society. [It is also dedicated to] creating multiple diverse spaces and opportunities to take learning into their own hands. [It is] really an invitation to people to collectively and personally dream about the world we want to see...and take on the learning we connect with to manifest that world.”

Before the event began, Spirit in Action wrote about the “hope that a commitment to continue the process from those who are inspired to do so” comes from the gathering. They continued to write, “The circle can grow, new voices will be included and alliances to advance a shared agenda for education may, and we hope, will emerge. Folks may engage in concrete collaborations with new allies or form distinct initiatives.” I am pleased to report that a commitment to the continuation of the process was made and the goal of “a vibrant, vision-based network for educational transformation” is certainly possible.

Isaac Graves grew up in The Free School (Albany, NY) and since graduation has worked extensively within the field of democratic and alternative education. From speaking to university students on democratic education in Mumbai, India to volunteering at Tamariki School in Christchurch, New Zealand, he’s been around. Isaac helped to found *Harriet Tubman Free School*, a democratic high school in the South End of Albany, and taught there for nearly three years. He is the co-editor of *The Directory of Democratic Education* and works for the Alternative Education Resource Organization directing their annual conference, serving as outreach coordinator, and managing their Albany office. Isaac is a lover of baseball, music, the outdoors, traveling, Indian food, hummus, and life in general. ●

News & Communications

COMPILED BY CAROL MORLEY AND RON MILLER

National.....

Testing of Kindergartners Is Out of Control, Says Children's Advocacy Group in New Report. Molly Holloway, a mother of twin kindergartners in Bowie, Maryland, can't understand why her children must take standardized tests every month in math, reading, social studies, and science. "One of the teachers has told me that the kindergarten curriculum is what used to be the first-grade curriculum," Holloway wrote. "What evidence do we have that this pushing is beneficial? While some children can handle the pressure, others cannot. One of my daughters struggles to keep up and hates school." Recent studies in New York City and Los Angeles confirm what these and other parents have observed: standardized testing and test prep have become daily activities in many public kindergartens. Teachers say they are under pressure to get children ready for the third-grade tests. The 254 teachers surveyed in the studies said they spent an average of 20 to 30 minutes per day in test-related activity.

The findings are documented in a new report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, released in March by the nonprofit Alliance for Childhood (www.allianceforchildhood.org). The authors, Edward Miller and Joan Almon, say that kindergarten testing is "out of control." High-stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating, as schools increasingly are required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs or special education classes on the basis of test scores. In New York City, for example, kindergarten children take a standardized I.Q. test to determine whether they qualify for "gifted and talented" classes. The city is also implementing a plan to test kindergarten, first-, and second-grade children as part of schools' performance evaluations. The test scores are used to assign letter grades, A to F, to all of the city's public schools. The grades are then used to determine rewards and punishments, including cash bonuses for teachers and principals and whether principals will be fired and schools shut down.

"Rigid testing policies do not make sense in early childhood education," states the Alliance for Childhood report. "Standardized testing of children under age eight, when used to make significant decisions about the child's education, is in direct conflict with the professional standards of every educational testing organization." The National Association of School Psychologists agrees,

saying that "evidence from research and practice in early childhood assessment indicates that issues of technical adequacy are more difficult to address with young children who have little test-taking experience, short attention spans, and whose development is rapid and variable." In Las Vegas, Nevada, kindergarten teachers report that last year they lost more than 30 days of school to mandatory assessments. They have organized to lobby the county school authorities to reduce the number of tests and "return to the implementation of developmentally appropriate standards." And a kindergarten teacher in Zanesville, Ohio, wrote to her local paper, "All we are doing is stealing childhood from innocent children. Shame on our government for making us be thieves. Shame on them for not listening to what children really need."

These practices may produce higher scores in first and second grade, but at what cost? Long-term studies suggest that the early gains fade away by fourth grade and that by age 10 children in play-based kindergartens excel over others in reading, math, social and emotional learning, creativity, oral expression, industriousness, and imagination, write the authors of the report. The report makes the following recommendations to educators, policymakers, and parents for ending the inappropriate use of tests in kindergarten:

- [1] Use alternatives to standardized assessments in kindergarten, such as teacher observations and assessment of children's work. Educate teachers in the use of these alternatives and in the risks and limitations of standardized testing of young children.
- [2] Do not make important decisions about young children, their teachers, or their schools based solely or primarily on standardized test scores.

Don't Take the Test! *by Juanita Doyon:* Conscientious objection in the form of refusal has been a great American tradition since Boston Harbor was transformed into the largest cup of tea in the world, in 1773. Fast forward to bus boycotts in Birmingham, AL, in response to unjust treatment of riders based on skin color. Now, compare the moral inequities of forced taxation without representation and forced segregation with moral inequity of forced standardization of learning and performance brought upon our public school children by the

National.....

imposition of widespread, incessant, high-stakes, standardized testing. Battle cry of the Test Resistance— “Don’t drink the tea; Don’t ride the bus; Don’t take the test!”

In my home state of Washington, the brand of test is the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The test has been in place for twelve years, and the process was adapted to fit federal No Child Left Behind requirements in 2002. WASL passage as a requirement for receipt of a high school diploma was put into place in 2008, resulting in the denial of graduation to thousands of deserving young people.

In Washington, parents and students claimed their right to opt out of state testing soon after WASL was introduced. In 2000, a fellow mother and I founded Mothers Against WASL by standing on a street corner holding signs proclaiming the right to “Just Opt Out.” The state education office soon labeled the action of opt out “refusal” and wrote a policy to match the parent and/or student action.

Mothers Against WASL (MAW) continued as a grassroots group until 2005, when we established a nonprofit organization, Parent Empowerment Network (PEN). PEN, which still maintains MAW and the website www.mothers-againstwasl.org, provides up-to-date information, support, and a complete opt out packet for parents and students.

As with any resistance movement, backlash and attempts at manipulation and coercion by the institutional hierarchy are inevitable. Depending on the school and district involved, parents and students can experience an inordinate amount of pressure to conform. PEN exists to help and provides parents with the backing of testing facts and statistics and current state policy. Parents are free to refer badgering school administrators to PEN leadership for “assistance.”

PEN also supports teachers who take bold steps to refuse to give the WASL or inform parents of their right to opt children out of the test. PEN has pledged to help parents and teachers in this situation file a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights.

As long as one child is denied access to well-rounded educational opportunity, the joy of learning, advancement to the next grade level, or a high school diploma, based on his or her scores on a standardized test, all children suffer. Resistance is never futile. At the very least, it teaches our children to stand up for what is right and just. At most, it provides a vital lesson to the institutional hierarchy about who is rightfully responsible for a child’s education, whether the choice is public, private or home school— the parent.

Juanita Doyon is the Director of Parent Empowerment Network and the author of a book to encourage educational activism, *Not With Our Kids You Don’t! Ten Strategies to Save Our Schools*, Heinemann, 2003. Juanita can be emailed at jedoyon@aol.com

Study Supports School Vouchers; In District, Pupils Outperform Peers On Reading Tests, By Maria Glod, Washington Post: A U.S. Education Department study found that District students who were given vouchers to attend private schools outperformed public school peers on reading tests, findings likely to reignite debate over the fate of the controversial program. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, the first federal initiative to spend taxpayer dollars on private school tuition, was created by a Republican-led Congress in 2004 to help students from low-income families. Congress has cut off federal funding after the 2009-10 school year unless lawmakers vote to reauthorize it. Overall, the study found that students who used the vouchers received reading scores that placed them nearly four months ahead of peers who remained in public school. However, as a group, students who had been in the lowest-performing public schools did not show those gains. There was no difference in math performance between the groups.

Online Schooling Gives Kids, Parents New Options for Education, *Deseret Morning News*: More than 3,000 Utah elementary, junior high and high school students attend school online. Some students earn credit toward a diploma using distance learning programs monitored by school districts. Others study at virtual schools complete with principals and teachers. All the children, whose education is funded by the government, get credit for attending public school. Online schooling — not to be confused with home schooling, insist teachers and administrators — is fairly new for K-12 students, but about 30 percent more parents are choosing it over traditional brick and mortar schools every year. By 2019, researchers at the International Association for K-12 Online Learning estimate public schools nationwide will deliver about 50 percent of their courses over the Internet. “Quite simply, the Internet is the future of schooling,” said Jeff Herr, head of school for Utah Virtual Academy, which is wrapping up its inaugural year. At most online schools, students spend about 30 percent of their time on the computer, doing activities, watching videos, reading text and taking quizzes. The rest of the school day is consumed working out of traditional text books or doing hands-on experiments and art projects — the supplies for which schools mail to students’ homes. “They can’t do everything online,” said Laura Belnap, director of Washington Online, school number 20 in Washington County School District. “Students get about 110 pounds of materials. They get microscopes, rocks, goggles, seeds, slides. We give them everything.” Everything, that is, except a full-time supervisor. “There is a lot of responsibility placed on parents because kids aren’t spending eight hours in a classroom with a trained teacher,” Belnap said. “Parents are the ones who are actually sitting there in the room.”

International.....

JAPAN

From **Japan's 'Exam Hell' Now Reaches into Preschool; Parents seek any advantage as competition heats up despite a lower birthrate**, by Yuriko Nagano, *The Christian Science Monitor*:

Japan's *juken*, or "exam hell," has long evoked images of stressed kids competing for slots at top universities in an all-or-nothing exam. But this approach has increasingly moved down the ladder. Now, in what is known as *ojuken*, nursery-schoolers are doing worksheets and attending special classes to secure a seat in primary school that their parents hope will ensure their long-term success. The reasons for the shift are complex. Japan's youth population is declining, and many colleges are scrambling to fill seats – something that should make it easier to get into all but the most exclusive schools. Instead, many parents are ever more relentlessly seeking competitive advantages, especially as the economic downturn makes competition for jobs more intense. "The low birthrate does seem to be pushing parents to give all they can to the one child," says Makoto Kobari, an associate professor at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts in Kyoto. "It's an act of selective extravagance." No formal data exist on the *ojuken* population. But the competition for the schools parents are targeting can be fierce: For the class entering Tokyo's Keio Gijuku Yochisha elementary school in 2008, for example, there were 2,468 applicants for 144 spots. In recent years, applicant numbers at Keio have steadily increased, up 10 percent over 2006. The examination process itself takes place between November and December, with the school year starting in April. But *ojuken* is a year-round business. At Nikken, most families enroll children for two years and typically spend \$22,000 on tuition. Not surprisingly, parents tend toward the wealthy side, according to Mr. Kobari: Some 56.8 percent earn more than 10 million yen (about \$100,000) per year. Most parents are university graduates and 76.5 percent of mothers are full-time housewives.

UNITED KINGDOM

From **MPs Call for Simpler Curriculum**, BBC News: The national curriculum for five to 16-year-olds in England is too heavily controlled by government, the Commons schools select committee has said. The curriculum should be slimmed down, according to the cross-party committee of MPs. And schools should have to follow the curriculum only in the core subjects of English, math, science and ICT. The government has accepted some reform is necessary, but says the curriculum is crucial to raising standards. Three Conservative MPs on the committee went further than colleagues and called for schools to be allowed to opt out of the curriculum altogether. The committee's report said there should be a cap on the proportion of the curriculum prescribed by central government. It said teachers had been "de-skilled" by high levels of central government guidance and prescription. "At

times schooling has appeared more of a franchise operation, dependent on a recipe handed down by government rather than the exercise of professional expertise by teachers," it said. The MPs said all schools should be allowed to follow just the curriculum in core subjects – a freedom already enjoyed by Academy schools. The report raised concerns about a lack of continuity between the primary and secondary curriculums and criticized the Department for Children, Schools and Families for not taking pupils' opinions and experience of the curriculum into account. The committee also rejected calls for pupils to start reception at age four because of their low staff to pupil ratio. Conservative committee member Graham Stuart said allowing parents and governors to vote on opting out of the curriculum would prevent too much central control. ●

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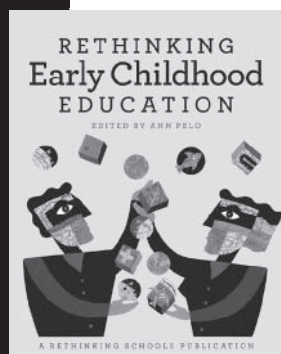
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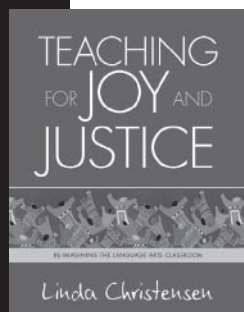
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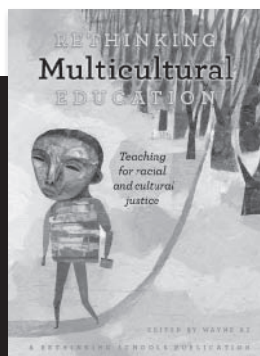
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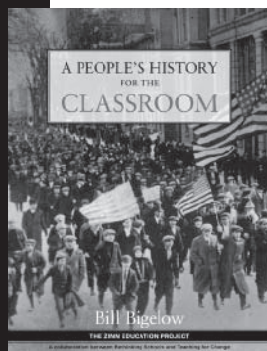
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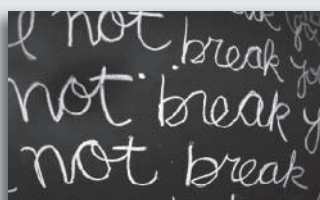
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